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ABSTRACT

Recent research illustrates the increasingly important role of the school principal. As a result, procedures for selecting principals have also become more critical to rural school districts. School systems, particularly rural school districts, are encouraged to adopt systematic, rational means for selecting administrators. Such procedures will enable superintendents and school boards to make valid, objective decisions when selecting future principals. This paper describes a model for a selection procedure that uses job descriptions, advertisements, candidate assessment measures and techniques, interviews, and reference checks to select the most qualified candidates for principalships. Use of an objective, written measure for assessment can identify personal and professional strengths and weaknesses. Relying on local perceptions of "fit" may be discriminatory and may produce inbreeding and stagnation of educational programs. Several rural school systems in Kentucky have implemented this alternative model, and preliminary results indicate the process works. Potential principals are given a renewed sense of personal integrity in the selection process. Those making the selections indicate candidates are better prepared for the realities of the job. The process does require considerable time and planning. This paper contains 45 references. (DHP)

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PRINCIPAL SELECTION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

A PROCESS MODEL

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PRINCIPAL SELECTION IN RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS:

A PROCESS MODEL

The decade of the 1980's has produced a plethora of reports regarding the school principal's expanded accountability for developing and sustaining productive schools. Researchers have postulated the principal's critical role in both school effectiveness and school improvement (McPherson, 1982), concluding with the contention that the principal is the most crucial position in the school system (Trump, 1987).

As the principal's responsibility has increased, so has the pressure on school boards and superintendents in rural school districts to make appropriate appointments when principal vacancies occur. Because employing good principals should be a systematic process, this model is designed to assist superintendents in rural school districts in making more valid judgements concerning prospective principals.

BACKGROUND

With the increased complexity and importance of the principalship, it is ironic that relatively little is known about

how principals are indentifed or ultimately selected (Zakariya, 1983). Three factors of society in general, and in education specifically, impinge on the selection of future principals. First, the principal is currently viewed as the person "in the middle." The principal is perceived to be a true middle manager, being bombarded from above by superintendents and school boards, from below by teachers, and from both sides by parents, community, and students.

Additionally, the continuing educational reform movement places much emphasis on the instructional leadership role of the principal which is a different role from that historically practiced by most principals. Consequently, school boards and superintendents expect principals to implement administrative policy while teachers and students expect curriculum development and a supportive climate (McGiffin, 1988). Add the conflict inherent in the collective bargaining process, and the principalship is not as attractive as once perceived (Summy, 1986).

Secondly, societal pressures dictate that more women and minorities be named to the principalship. Research indicates that women account for approximately three percent of all principalships while minorities make up a similar percentage (Peterson & Finn, 1985). Although many rural areas may not have significant minority populations, females are the

majority of employees in most such districts, but typically occupy a minority of the administrative positions.

Third, approximately fifty percent of all currently employed principals are age fifty-five (55) or over (Finn, 1986). Consequently, the most dramatic administrative turnover in educational administration history will occur during the next decade with the retirement and subsequent replacement of half of all principals. With the anticipation of such dramatic changes, school districts, especially rural school districts, are encouraged to develop appropriate selection techniques to aid in the selection of the next generation of school principals (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).

UNIQUENESS OF RURAL SCHOOL DISTRICTS

Rural school districts exhibit several unique attributes that make them different from urban or suburban school districts. First, rural school districts often have a different clientele than other school districts. Students who attend rural schools often have different source of motivation than other students. Additionally, their support structure is often different from students in the urban areas. Secondly, rural schools extend the definition of community, often inculcating a more diverse population than other districts. Third, the lack of population often highlights a difficulty in locating and retaining qualified teachers and educational administrators. Fourth, there is also

difficulty in providing ongoing staff development for teachers, but particularly for administrators. Fifth, rural school systems must address the issue of recruitment of administrators from outside the local school district. Typically, there is an out-migration rather than an in-migration of qualified administrators, or even teachers.

However, with all the problems faced by rural school districts in locating and retaining qualified educational administrators, there are some positive aspects to the dilemma. Rural school districts give educators the opportunity to exercise leadership more often than in non-rural school districts. Also the administrators and faculty are often more congruent in their approach to education than in other districts.

PURPOSES

According to Castetter (1981) there are five primary purposes for a specific procedure to be utilized when making selections for administrative positions. The first and most logical reason for a formal selection procedure is to find candidates "who meet established qualifications." Note that Castetter (1981) specified qualifications, not certification. In rural areas, as in other non-rural areas, a significant difference exists between qualification and certification. Although certified, many candidates for administrative positions are not qualified by local standards.

Secondly, the selection procedure should help identify candidates "who appear likely to succeed on the job." The premium is on finding candidates who will be successful, not just occupy a position. Locating and selecting personnel who are inclined to find "sufficient position satisfaction to remain in the system" is

the third reason for a selection procedure. Superintendents and school boards are looking for stability when making principal selections. They desire candidates who will stay with the school for more than a year. Continual turnover of top administrative personnel leads to problems with both teacher and student morale and decreases the efficiency of the individual school as well as the entire school district. Fourth, candidates are assessed for employment based on "who will be effective contributors" to both school and organizational goals. Lastly, the selection process identifies candidates "who will be sufficiently motivated to achieve a high level of self-development." Superintendents desire administrators who are self-motivated, with a clear sense of mission for both themselves and their school constituency.

The major objective of principal selection in all school districts is to locate and employ persons who will be successful in developing, implementing, and coordinating programs that will educate children. With the financial constraints hampering many rural school districts, an improper selection process can prove very costly if the correct person is not employed.

A poor principal selection can often destroy an entire decade of progress, or hamper educational improvement for years. An ineffective teacher may damage a classroom of students for a year, but an ineffective principal may damage an entire generation of young people. Thus, a rational system of principal selection that provides a pool of competent candidates is critical, especially to the rural school districts (Sashkin & Huddle, 1988). In addition, this systematic process provides the local board of education with a more objective "instrument of control to maintain and to improve staff quality," while the superintendent is provided with a means "for justifying personnel selections" (Castetter, 1981).

STEPS IN THE SELECTION PROCESS

The model herein described, and graphically illustrated in Figure one, is designed to provide rural school districts with a selection procedure that can be utilized with most administrative vacancies. The model is not intended as a single information source, but as a process that can help insure both accountability and structure. Since many rural school districts do not attract the substantial number of applicants often present in large suburban or urban school systems, this model provides the rural districts with an opportunity for continuity, structure, and accountability in the screening and selection process. School districts are encouraged to validate all steps

in this process within proper state and local employment statutes and regulations (Beckham & Zirkel, 1983).

ACTION PLAN

Whether this model or some other is utilized, a specific, systematic procedure should be developed and implemented by the rural school system to insure credibility in the selection process. Both school board policy and administrative regulations regarding screening and selecting any employee, especially administrators, should be adopted locally. As more administrative vacancies occur in the near future, the process of screening and selection will become more critical to all school districts (Cornett, 1983). Normally, superintendents and administrative staffs cannot justify the time to interview thirty applicants; conversely, they cannot take the chance of overlooking the best candidate by not having a standardized screening and selection procedure (Redfern, 1984). In today's dynamic educational climate the possibility of excluding potentially capable administrators is too great to be left to a chance selection process, or purely personal or political considerations.

Additionally, many parents and teachers in rural areas also desire input into the selection of future principals, especially as candidates are screened for specific schools. Without a sanctioned process, many constituent groups or

individuals may perceive an inability to significantly impact decision making, particularly in rural areas (Herzog, 1984). Superintendents and school boards cannot afford to alienate concerned citizens; therefore, some clearing defined selection process is imperative. Utilization of this model would allow interested groups or individuals to voice concerns or opinions as each step in the process continues.

JOB DESCRIPTIONS

Job descriptions are crucial to any professional job, especially for educational administrators, as they provide the structure for the entire selection process. Job descriptions should be developed for each administrative position, including each individual principalship, as the requirements and responsibilities for each position are unique. Without an accurate job description potential principal candidates are unsure of the selection process, the job requirements, and apprehensive about the school system expectations.

Job descriptions also provide a benchmark for candidate comparison. Potential principals can all be judged against common criteria, not some hypothetical rendition of "what should be." The job description should be explicit, organized, and an accurate reflection of duties and responsibilities assigned to the principal, including community, faculty, student and administrative expectations. The new

principal must live with the job description, therefore it should be as accurate as possible regarding expectations of the principal's behavior.

ADVERTISEMENT

Many school districts have negotiated employee contracts which either enhance or restrict the opportunities for advertising principal vacancies. Administrators must follow either the guidelines contained in negotiated contracts or local school board policies; however, every effort should be made to advertise to the extent possible. National or regional searches may prove futile for many rural school systems, but state and regional searches are often quite productive in locating a quality pool of applicants. Searches should be extended as far as the superintendent and school board determine feasible, but should always extend outside the local school district.

Advertisements can be in local or state circulation newspapers, national administrator newsletters, state newsletters, university placement services, private placement services, or simply word-of-mouth. Accurate and timely advertisements are critical to both the quality and quantity of applicants in the selection pool, particularly in rural school districts. Advertisement should specify the specific position qualifications for the job, the closing date, and the contact person. Many systems have also been successful by including

information regarding the rural school system and the community. Attractive, accurate and timely advertisements will help rural school districts increase the pool of applicants available for administrative searches.

PHILOSOPHICAL FOUNDATIONS

Once the pool of applicants has been identified, several tools can be utilized to gather information about the prospective principals. One such instrument is an assessment of the educational and administrative philosophy of the candidate. However, please be warned, no one instrument alone can determine the candidate's ability or potential. The applicability of this instrument is in conjunction with other procedures outlined in the model. The instrument provides an insight into the "fit" between the candidate's philosophy and the school district's philosophy (Wynne, 1987).

Without an objective, written measure there is often an over-reliance on non-specific methods for determining "fit" (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). There is a tendency in many school districts, not entirely rural, to rely on personal perceptions of a candidate's physical looks, personal projection, confidence, and assertiveness rather than an objective measure of philosophic principles and identification of personal and professional strengths and weaknesses (Baehler, 1987). The local version of "fit" frequently prevents a realistic assessment of outside

candidates, women, and minorities, especially in some isolated rural school districts (Thomas,1986). This local "fit" has been termed anything from "the good-ole-boys network" to discrimination. Whatever the title, the result is the same, inbreeding of administrative thinking and stagnation of educational programs. Accordingly, this instrument is designed to give all applicants a commensurate opportunity.

This instrument was developed to survey attitudes and philosophies of prospective candidates concerning the following topics:

Educational philosophy
Administrative philosophy
Community relations
Teacher observation/evaluation
Instructional leadership
Administrative management
Curriculum design/implementation
Staff supervision/evaluation
Staff development
Organizational management
School law
Effective schools
Leadership behaviors
Utilization of test results
Financial management
Discipline

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Instructional materials

Special programs

Personnel utilization

(McPherson, 1982; Manasse, 1983; Huddle, 1984; Knoll, 1984; DeBovise, 1984; Cunningham, 1985; Bossert, Dwyer, & Lee, 1982; Murphy, Hallinger, & Peterson, 1985; Rutherford, 1985; Sange, 1982; & Yatkin, 1986)

A sample question to be asked a prospective principal could be:

A parent came to school complaining that his son failed a class because the teacher was not teaching, only giving seat work assignments. He says that several other parents support his concern. As principal, what would you do?

A. Tell the parent to discuss the problem with the teacher.

B. Tell the parent you will investigate the matter, check with the teacher, and later call the parent.

C. Tell the parent that none of your teachers behave that way.

D. Listen to the parent and later advise the teacher not to give seat work.

E. Listen intently to the parent, but do nothing.

(Gibbins & Curnutte, 1987)

This flexible instrument provides the administrative team (superintendent, staff, others) the freedom to choose from a bank of questions. The questions can be tailored to the individual vacancy; however, the same questions are asked of all applicants for the same position to insure consistency and integrity (Jinks, 1985). For example, certain questions are more appropriate for candidates seeking an elementary principalship, other questions are designed for those applying for a secondary principalship. However, all elementary candidates would be asked to answer the same questions. This flexibility is critical to many rural school districts who do not enjoy a large pool of applicants for administrative openings.

The real value of this instrument is that it should be developed and administered locally. No national examination is known to provide this information in such a flexible format. The questions can be drawn from realistic experiences in the local district, to hypothetical "what if's." Although answers can be tailored to the ethos of the local community and the perceived needs of the school system, the answers should remain the same for each candidate. This may appear to be a contradiction to the need for outside personnel, however, each candidate must be able to relate to the constituency of the district.

INTERVIEW ANALYSIS

After the scores are compared, the top candidates are then interviewed. The initial interview may be by telephone or in person. If the candidate lives outside the district, a telephone interview might be utilized to save expenditures. The telephone interview can then be used as a further screening device before more detailed personal interviews are conducted.

Perhaps more has been discussed and written about the oral interview than any other phase of the selection process (Donaghy, 1984). And yet, there is still immense concern regarding the inability of the oral interview to predict success on the job (Brannon, 1975). All personnel administrators and superintendents can share "war stories" about candidates who were brilliant in the interview, but bombed miserably as a principal (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983). However, despite the obvious deficiencies, the interview remains "a central component of most...selection procedures" (Tengler & Jablin, 1983). Some researchers believe the popularity of the interview is connected to the tradition of indoctrination historically practiced by some superintendents. Others speculate that some superintendents continue to employee by "gut level" perceptions about candidates rather than using more objective data. Whatever the reason, the interview continues to be the "bread and butter" approach with many school districts, particularly rural districts.

The interview is designed to acquaint the school district with the applicant, and hopefully, the applicant with the rural

school district. For many applicants, particularly those outside the district, this acquaintance stage may be their first exposure to the uniqueness of most rural school districts. Consequently, the interview should be structured, scheduled, and not handled in a haphazard manner (Tucker & Rowe, 1977). Most researchers agree that principalship interviews should be conducted by an interview committee rather than by one administrator (Diamond, 1974).

The interviewing committee is charged with the responsibility of creating an atmosphere conducive to discussion and the freedom to exchange information. They should, however, arrange to have the candidates' responses recorded without being obtrusive (Goldstein, 1986). As a professional courtesy the administrative team should allow the candidate to respond without fear, threat, or intimidation.

Oral interviews should be of two general types: the standardized and the open-ended (Donaghy, 1984). In the standardized interview, consistent questions are asked each applicant permitting comparison of answers. The open-ended questioning section of the interview allows the candidate to express opinions, beliefs, and attitudes about topics introduced by either the interviewers or the candidate. The model described herein incorporates both types of interviews (Office of Educational Research and Improvement, 1987).

Samples of structured interview questions might include:

A. Why do you desire to be a principal?

B. What in your training and experience convinces you of your potential for success as a principal?

C. What is the principal's role in implementing school board policy?

(Rebore, 1987)

Samples of open-ended interview questions might include:

A. If the local Lions Club invited you to address their next meeting concerning the school effectiveness movement, what points would you make during your presentation?

B. Describe one of the most successful accomplishments of your professional career.

C. Describe what you believe to be a principal's typical work day.

This procedure accords the interview team indications of several behaviors desired in the principalship; i.e., organizational ability, capacity to think quickly, verbal expression, aptitude for meeting deadlines, and interpersonal relations (Engel & Erion, 1984). The basic tenet is that "the best predictor of future success is past success" (Stewart & Cash, 1985). Additionally, both non-verbal behavior and oral expressions exhibited during the interview can be observed and documented. In closing the interview, a standard explanation should be given on how the final decision will be made and when the selection process will be concluded. The interview committee should be able to explain the details of

the process including when the candidate, whether successful or unsuccessful, will be notified (Stewart & Cash, 1985).

STRESS

Many superintendents and school boards in rural school districts have recently expressed a concern for additional knowledge concerning criteria that should be utilized with principal selection procedures (Leithwood & Montgomery, 1984). One concept that has received considerable attention is the assessment center procedure. Assessment centers are designed to provide enhanced performance information regarding candidates, typically as they respond to stressful situations or simulations. The most widely utilized assessment center for principals was developed by the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP). Originally implemented during 1975, the NASSP assessment centers have assessed thousands of candidates throughout the United States and three foreign countries (Erlandson & Gonzalez, 1988).

The NASSP assessment center evaluates candidates in twelve generic skill dimensions. These dimensions have been empirically determined, court validated, and are measured by various exercises and simulations (Landholm, 1986). The primary purpose is to provide more objective data to local school districts for assistance in screening prospective principal candidates (Mauriel, 1984). The NASSP assessment centers do not

recommend employment or advise local school districts on who to employ, rather, the centers provide data on the candidates that can be used by the local school districts in conjunction with other data sources (Erlandson, 1987). This objective data is especially critical to rural school districts who must make crucial employment decisions, often with limited knowledge of the candidate's ability.

In the absence of an assessment center evaluation, this model is designed to provide a similar simulation for prospective principal candidates. These simulations also provide insight into the candidates'organizational ability and written expression, which are both critical to success in the principalship (Ackerman & Barth, 1988).

A sample simulation could be:

Yesterday you received a written directive from your superintendent to explain, in writing, why your school has not shown an increase in student achievement scores comparable to other schools in the district. Outline in writing, your proposal to improve test scores, including, but not limited to, the utilization of personnel, financial resources, materials, supplies, together with justification for your decisions.

Other simulations are based on group leadership activities, written simulations, and analysis of video-tape simulations. Participants are judged on criteria similar to those used in

NASSP assessment center activities, in the sense that the same twelve skill dimensions are assessed.

REFERENCES

After candidates are interviewed and assessed, references should be carefully checked. The process of checking references is more than a cursory effort, rather it is an intense, systematic procedure for gathering additional data about the candidates.

References are the most widely used and grossly abused element of the selection process. However, at this point in the process the superintendent of the rural school district should assume the responsibility for contacting previous employers to obtain expanded appraisals of the candidates. Especially when selecting prospective principals, superintendents or the administrative team should carefully validate the academic degrees and certification of candidates (Goldstein, 1986). If this step can be accomplished before or during the interview, the time savings for the superintendent would be advantageous.

Letters of reference are typically not useful at this juncture in the process. At best, letters of reference indicate only that a person has significant contacts to request and obtain such a letter. Most letters of reference address personal attributes and are not valid indicators of future professional performance (Stewart & Cash, 1985). Rather than relying on

letters of reference, the superintendent should make follow-up telephone calls to selected references or contacts. Although this is not a fool proof approach, many references are more willing to discuss a candidate by telephone than in writing.

Many persons should be contacted, both those listed by the candidate, and those known to either the superintendent or the selection committee. All former employers should be contacted as well as selected other references. If the candidate has prior experience as a principal, the committee should call selected staff members form the former school as well as the candidate's immediate supervisor. Some superintendents will advocate contacting certain former staff members, particularly custodians and secretaries.

The superintendency is a small professional and social group and the members usually protect each other, however, they are capable of providing misleading information on candidates. Whatever the reason for the discrepancy, the old adage holds true, "buyer beware." This adds further credence to the necessity of checking a variety of sources for information about potential principal candidates.

When the information from the reference check is compiled with the other documentation collected in the selection process, the superintendent makes an employment recommendation to the school board. All candidates, regardless of their standing in the process, are notified of the decision (Baltzell & Dentler, 1983).

IN OPERATION

The concept sounds great in theory, but does it actually work in practice? Several rural school systems in Kentucky have implemented this alternative model and preliminary findings indicate that the process works. Potential principals are given a renewed sense of personal integrity in the selection process and those making the selections indicate that the candidates are better prepared for the reality of the principalship (Laws, Brown & Richardson, 1989).

Although the results appear favorable, potential adopters should be aware of two crucial points. First, this process demands a considerable amount of time and energy; it doesn't happen without considerable advance preparation and planning. Second, superiors making the personnel decisions must be aware of the implications for either boosting or destroying teacher morale by this program. Some of those not selected as principals will find problems with the new system, a "scape goat" to soothe their failure. Some may even express a desire to return to the "old system" where choices where made based on some criterion other than ability. However, extensive experience has shown that it is "cheaper" to hurt the morale of a few than to have a ineffective principal destroy a school.

CONCLUSION

Research reported during the past decade illustrates the increasingly important role of the school principal. Because of the principal's value, principal selection procedures have also become more critical to rural school districts. School systems, particularly rural school districts, are encouraged to adopt systematic, rational means for administrator selection which will enable superintendents and school boards to make more valid, objective decisions when selecting future principals.

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